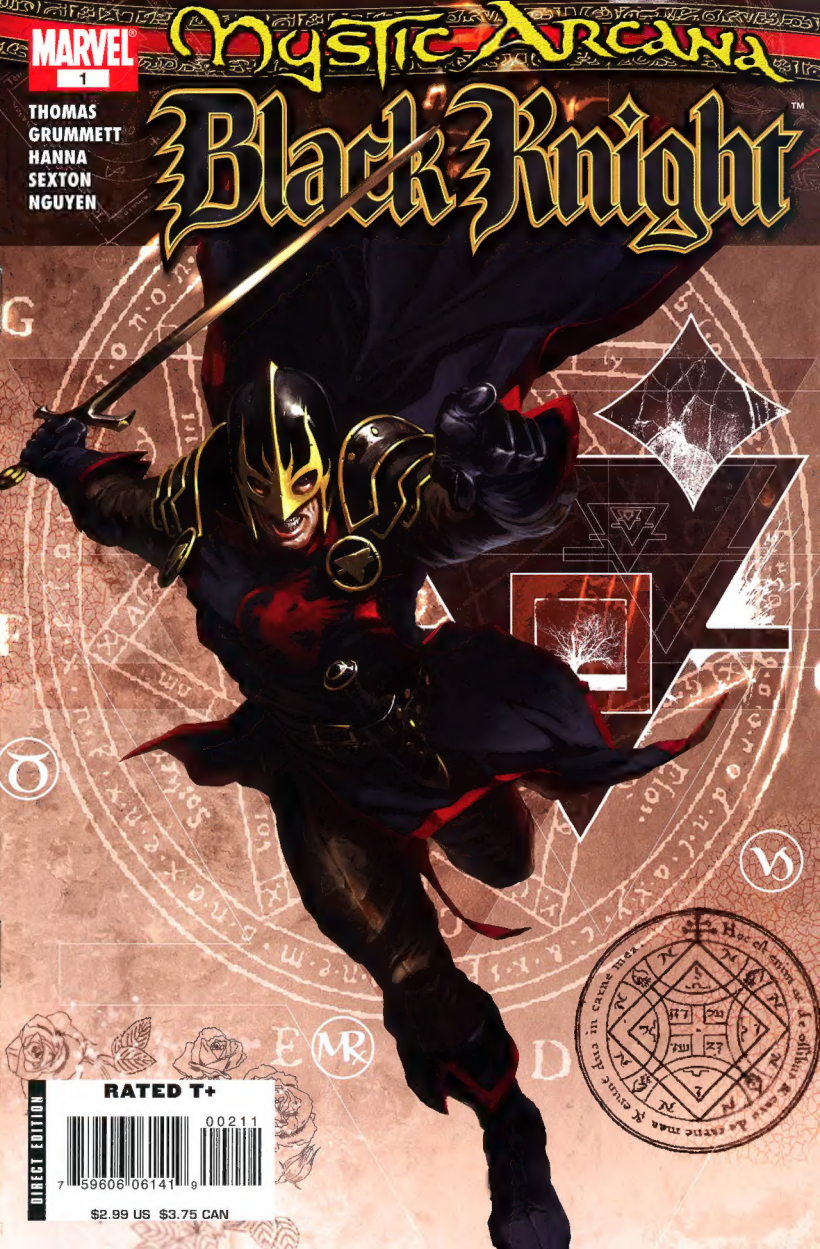
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1
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VISUAL CONCEPTS

7

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Mystic Arcana

Black Knight

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The first step to mastering the Arcane Arts is recognizing patterns that others don't see.

The first three Marvels of the Golden Age were a hero of fire, an underwater emperor and an angel who learned to fly. They are joined by a captain who stood for this great land. Fire, water, air, earth. The first heroes of the Silver Age were a man who flows like liquid, a thing made of stone, a woman as transparent as air and a hero made of fire. Water, earth, air, fire. 1234. Eternity, Infinity, Oblivion, Death. Surfer, Walker, Tamer, Lord. 1234. four kinds of magic. Ego-centric, Eco-centric, Exo-centric, Necromantic. Four Elder Gods. Four Cornerstones of Creation. A Sword, a Crown, a Rose, a Mirror. 1234. Air, Earth, Water, Fire.

The second step to mastering the Arcane Arts is recognizing that patterns can change.

123...π

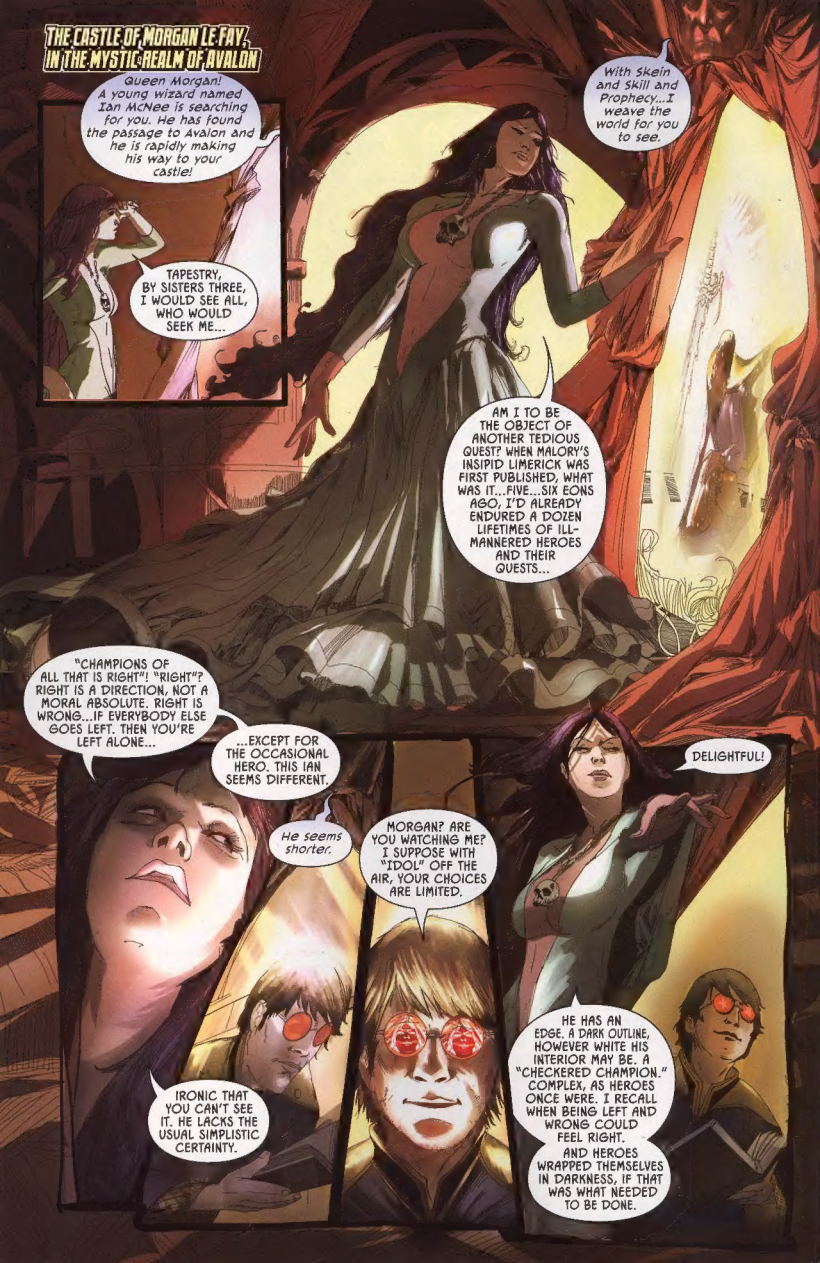
Welcome to the world of Magic.

Though many have assumed the mantle throughout history, the first BLACK KNIGHT was a 6th-century warrior who served at the court of King Arthur.

A mystical artist who once challenged Doctor Strange for the mantle of Sorcerer Supreme, IAN McNEE's magical abilities are perhaps eclipsed only by his arrogance. He possesses mastery over numerous spells and the ability to shield himself from mystic attacks.

Due to a recent visit by the Omnipotent Oshtur, McNee has been charged with casting a spell that will revive the magician Heka-Nut and save all of magic in the process. But in order to do so, Ian must seek out the four Talismans of the Elder Gods, aka the CORNERSTONES OF CREATION.

MYSTIC ARCANA: BLACK KNIGHT No. 1, September, 2007. Published Monthly by MARVEL PUBLISHING, INC., a subsidiary of MARVEL ENTERTAINMENT, INC. OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 417 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10016. © 2007 Marvel Characters, Inc. All rights reserved. All characters featured in this issue and the distinctive names and likenesses thereof, and all related indicia are trademarks of Marvel Characters, Inc. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with those of any living or dead person or institution is intended, and any such similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. $2.99 per copy in the U.S. and $3.75 in Canada (GST #R127032852) in the direct market and $3.99 per copy in the U.S. and $5.75 in Canada (GST #R127032852) through the newsstand; Canadian Agreement #40668537. **Printed in Canada.** ALAN FINE, CEO Marvel Toys & Publishing Divisions and CMO Marvel Entertainment, Inc.; DAVID GABRIEL, Senior VP of Publishing Sales & Circulation; DAVID BOGART, VP of Business Affairs & Editorial Operations; MICHAEL PASCIULLO, VP Merchandising & Communications; JIM BOYLE, VP of Publishing Operations; DAN CARR, Executive Director of Publishing Technology; JUSTIN F. GABRIE, Managing Editor; SUSAN CRESPI, Production Manager; STAN LEE, Chairman Emeritus. For information regarding advertising in Marvel Comics or on Marvel.com, please contact Joe Maimone, Advertising Director, at jmaimone@marvel.com or 212-576-8534. For Marvel subscription inquiries, please call 800-217-9158.


THE CASTLE OF MORGAN LE FAY, IN THE MYSTIC REALM OF AVALON
Queen Morgan! A young wizard named Ian McNee is searching for you. He has found the passage to Avalon and he is rapidly making his way to your castle!
TAPESTRY, BY SISTERS THREE, I WOULD SEE ALL, WHO WOULD SEEK ME...
With Skein and Skill and Prophecy...I weave the world for you to see.
AM I TO BE THE OBJECT OF ANOTHER TEDIOUS QUEST? WHEN MALORY'S INSIPID LIMERICK WAS FIRST PUBLISHED, WHAT WAS IT...FIVE...SIX EONS AGO, I'D ALREADY ENDURED A DOZEN LIFETIMES OF ILL-MANNERED HEROES AND THEIR QUESTS...
"CHAMPIONS OF ALL THAT IS RIGHT"! "RIGHT"? RIGHT IS A DIRECTION, NOT A MORAL ABSOLUTE. RIGHT IS WRONG...IF EVERYBODY ELSE GOES LEFT. THEN YOU'RE LEFT ALONE...
...EXCEPT FOR THE OCCASIONAL HERO. THIS IAN SEEMS DIFFERENT.
He seems shorter.
MORGAN? ARE YOU WATCHING ME? I SUPPOSE WITH "IDOL" OFF THE AIR, YOUR CHOICES ARE LIMITED.
DELIGHTFUL!
IRONIC THAT YOU CAN'T SEE IT. HE LACKS THE USUAL SIMPLISTIC CERTAINTY.
HE HAS AN EDGE. A DARK OUTLINE, HOWEVER WHITE HIS INTERIOR MAY BE. A "CHECKERED CHAMPION." COMPLEX, AS HEROES ONCE WERE. I RECALL WHEN BEING LEFT AND WRONG COULD FEEL RIGHT.
AND HEROES WRAPPED THEMSELVES IN DARKNESS, IF THAT WAS WHAT NEEDED TO BE DONE.

AVALON, 6TH CENTURY A.D.
THE CLASH AND CLAMOR OF SWORDS IS NOW BUT HALF-REMEMBERED ECHOES...
AND WHERE, AN HOUR OR AN ETERNITY BEFORE, A MULTITUDE HAD STRIVEN MIGHTILY WITH BLADE AND BATTLE-AXE, NOW ONLY ONE MAN REMAINS UPON HIS FEET...
THE BLACK KNIGHT
IT BURNS...
SCRIBE – ROY THOMAS
ILLUSTRATORS – TOM GRUMMETT & SCOTT HANNA
COLORIST – MICHELLE MADSEN
CALLIGRAPHER – BLAMBOT'S NATE PIEKOS
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PUBLISHER – DAN BUCKLEY
SPECIAL THANKS TO JEAN-MARC LOFFICIER

CAMELOT BURNS!
YOUR DREAM IS DEAD, MERLIN.
ARE YOU?
AND, IF NOT--THEN WHERE ARE YOU??
IN THE SKY, SIR PERCY--BUT NOT YET IN HEAVEN.
MERLIN!
I KNEW YOUR VOICE, EVEN CROAKED THROUGH A RAVEN'S THROAT!
DID YOU ASSUME THAT ILL-OMEN SHAPE BECAUSE ARTHUR IS NO MORE?
NAY! ARTHUR PENDRAGON LIVES!
BUT LATELY, I STOOD AT HIS SIDE IN YOUR OWN CASTLE SCANDIA.
OUR KING HAS REPAIRED TO YOUR FORTRESS TO PLAN A NEW STRATEGY AGAINST THE TRAITOR MORDRED IN THIS GRIM HOUR.
GO TO HIM--AND WE MAY YET SNATCH VICTORY FROM DISASTER'S DARKSOME JAWS.
I SHALL GUARD OUR KING WITH MY LIFE, WISE MAGE.

SIGNAL LOST
SIGNAL LOST
SIGNAL LOST
SIGNAL LOST
SIGNAL LOST
SIGNAL LOST
SIGNAL LOST
SIGNAL LOST
S.O.S.
S.O.S.
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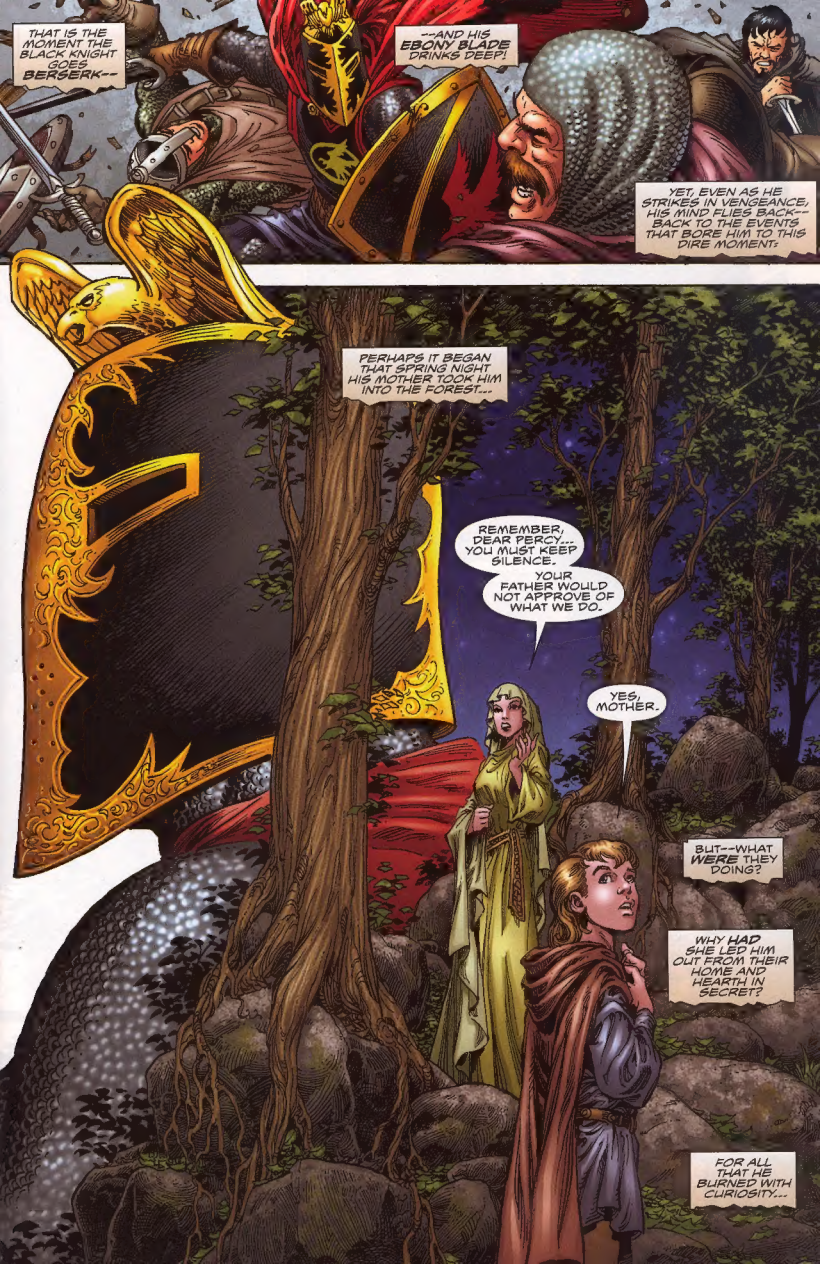
MANY LEAGUES NORTH OF CAMELOT LIES CASTLE SCANDIA, YET THE BLACK KNIGHT'S STEED--GIVEN HIM LONG SINCE BY MERLIN--NEVER TIRES...
...AND EACH HAMMERING HOOFBEAT MARKS TIME IN A SONG OF GROWING DREAD.
UNTIL, NIGH THE WITCHING HOUR...
THE CASTLE! AND FROM IT--SOUNDS OF BATTLE!
HOLD FAST, MY KING!
THE SIGHT HE SEES IN HIS OWN COUNCIL ROOM DESPAIRS HIM:
ARTHUR, LIEGE-LORD OF BRITAIN, BESET BY HOSTILE KNIGHTS--HIS LOYAL GUARDS LIFELESS ON COLD STONES--
--AND, POISED TO STRIKE--HIS TREACHEROUS NEPHEW, MORDRED!
ARRRR!
BUT IT IS ANOTHER'S HAND THAT STRIKES THE FATAL BLOW.


THAT IS THE MOMENT THE BLACK KNIGHT GOES BERSERK--
--AND HIS EBONY BLADE DRINKS DEEP!
YET, EVEN AS HE STRIKES IN VENGEANCE, HIS MIND FLIES BACK-- BACK TO THE EVENTS THAT BORE HIM TO THIS DIRE MOMENT:
PERHAPS IT BEGAN THAT SPRING NIGHT HIS MOTHER TOOK HIM INTO THE FOREST...
REMEMBER, DEAR PERCY... YOU MUST KEEP SILENCE.
YOUR FATHER WOULD NOT APPROVE OF WHAT WE DO.
YES, MOTHER.
BUT--WHAT WERE THEY DOING?
WHY HAD SHE LED HIM OUT FROM THEIR HOME AND HEARTH IN SECRET?
FOR ALL THAT HE BURNED WITH CURIOSITY...

...HE HAD NO SLIGHTEST INKLING.
ERE LONG, THEY REACHED AN OPEN CIRCLE IN THE WOOD.
YOU ARE STAYED FOR, LADY EVAINE.
FOR ONLY OUR PRIESTESS CAN LEAD OUR WORSHIP.
DRUIDS!
WERE THESE THE SAME PRIESTS HIS FATHER DROVE FROM HIS LANDS, VOWING TO BEHEAD THEM IF E'ER THEY DARED RETURN?
HE SENSED HIS MOTHER WAS THE POWER HERE...AS HIS SIRE WAS AT CASTLE SCANDIA.
SHE LED THEM IN A PRAYER TO GWYNN, THE HUNTER SPIRIT THEY WORSHIPPED AS SPRINGTIME INCARNATE.
SUDDENLY, THERE WAS A BRIGHTNESS--- AS IF SUN HAD USURPED THE MOON'S DOMAIN---
A MAN STOOD WHERE NONE HAD STOOD BEFORE...AND THE BOY KNEW THIS WAS GWYNN HIMSELF.
I PURSUE MY ELDER BROTHER GWYTHR---HE WHO IS THE WINTER.
THUS THE ETERNAL CYCLE OF NATURE.
ONE DAY, HE WILL HOLD THE UPPER HAND AGAIN...AND THE EARTH WILL GROW COLD.

BUT FOR NOW, GWYNN IS SUPREME...AND WE PAY YOU HOMAGE AFTER A HARD WINTER.
YES, MY BROTHER'S YOKE IS HEAVY.
AH! I SEE YOU HAVE BROUGHT...
...THE ONE WHO IS NEEDFUL!
PERCY HAD HEARD THE DRUIDS SACRIFICED CHILDREN TO GWYNN.
BUT--THE SPIRIT OF THE FOREST MERELY LAID HIS GLOVED HAND UPON PERCY'S BROW.
AYE, YOU ARE THE ONE, BOY.
IT IS SCRIVEN ON THE WIND THAT YOU WILL BECOME THE HAND OF FATE.
FROM THIS DAY, YOU MUST BE TRAINED ACCORDINGLY...FOR, YOURS WILL BE THE CHOICE THAT WILL SHAPE THE WORLD!

"TRAINING," MY LORD?
SURELY YOU DO NOT MEAN--IN THE WAYS OF WAR!
I MEANT TO RAISE HIM AS A MAN OF PEACE.
WAR AND PEACE ARE THE NETHER SIDES OF THE SAME TREE...
...AND SOME SERVE PEACE BEST WHEN THEY HOLD SWORD IN HAND.
THE HUNTER SPIRIT HAS SPOKEN, LADY EVAINE.
AND I, TOO, BOW TO HIS WORD.
IT SHALL BE AS HE HAS SAID.
BUT THE HOODED FIGURE HAD GONE...AND PERCY KNEW, SOMEHOW, THAT HIS LIFE HAD BEEN CHANGED FOREVER.

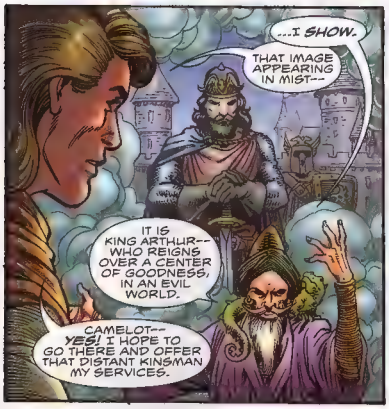
FROM THAT TIME FORTH, WHEN HIS FATHER HAD PERCY INSTRUCTED IN THE SWORD...
...SIR DANDEL NOTED THAT HIS WIFE NO LONGER PROTESTED, AS IN DAYS PAST.
HOW HE WOULD HAVE RAGED, HAD HE GUESSED SHE WAS MERELY FOLLOWING THE DICTATES OF WHAT HE WOULD HAVE TERMED A "HEATHEN SPIRIT"!
WHEN, SOME YEARS LATER, HIS MOTHER FOLLOWED HIS FATHER INTO THE LAND FROM WHICH NO MAN RETURNS...
...PERCY BECAME LORD OF THAT POCKET REALM.
SIR PERCY OF SCANDIA, HIS FATHER HAD DUBBED HIM WHEN KNIGHTING HIM.
BUT HE HAD NOT LONG TO BROOD ON THEIR PASSING...
...BEFORE HE HAD AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.
COME, YOUNG PERCY. IT IS TIME!
GUARDS! AN INTRUDER HAS FOUND HIS WAY INTO MY CHAMBERS!
HO, GUARDS!

WE COME, M'LORD!
IF YOUR MEN ARE BLIND AS TO MY MISSION, SIR PERCY...

...'TIS MEET THEY SHOULD BE BLIND TO ALL THINGS!
M-MY EYES--!
ALL IS DARKNESS!

THEY WILL SEE AGAIN, IN A LITTLE WHILE.
I NEED NO OTHERS TO DO MY FIGHTING FOR ME, BLACKGUARD!
STAY THY HAND, PERCY.
I AM MERLIN...

I... HAVE HEARD THAT NAME WHISPERED...
...AND I HAVE COME NOT TO ASSAULT YOU, BUT TO BEG YOUR HELP.
SAY ON... FROM A DISTANCE!
I DO NOT "SAY," MERELY...

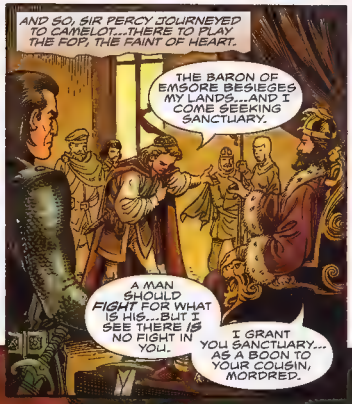

...I SHOW.
THAT IMAGE APPEARING IN MIST--
IT IS KING ARTHUR-- WHO REIGNS OVER A CENTER OF GOODNESS, IN AN EVIL WORLD.
CAMELOT-- YES! I HOPE TO GO THERE AND OFFER THAT DISTANT KINSMAN MY SERVICES.

AND HERE, HIS NEPHEW, MORDRED--AND HIS WITCH-WIFE, MORGAN LE FAY.
MORDRED-- MY OWN COUSIN!
THEY ARE SCIONS OF DARKNESS, WHO WISH CAMELOT TO FALL INTO WRATHFUL RUIN!

YOU'VE POWER TO CONJURE UP SUCH VISIONS---YET YOU WANT MY HELP?
I SEEK IT FOR ARTHUR'S SAKE---FOR BRITAIN'S!
I BESEECH YOU--GO TO CAMELOT--AND THERE, PLAY THE COWARD.
YOU WANT ME TO ACT THAT WHICH I AM NOT?

BUT SURELY ARTHUR NEEDS STRONG SWORDS AROUND HIM...
AND YOURS SHALL BE THE STRONGEST OF THEM ALL.
BUT IT SHALL STRIKE IN SECRET, WHEN HE NEEDS IT MOST!

WILL YOU AID ME? WILL YOU BE THE HAND OF FATE THAT WIELDS A BLADE OF DESTINY?
"HAND OF FATE"? ANOTHER CALLED ME THAT... LONG AGO.
I FEEL... I MUST FOLLOW ON YOUR PATH... FOR NOW.


AND SO, SIR PERCY JOURNEYED TO CAMELOT...THERE TO PLAY THE FOP, THE FAINT OF HEART.
THE BARON OF EMSORE BESIEGES MY LANDS...AND I COME SEEKING SANCTUARY.
A MAN SHOULD FIGHT FOR WHAT IS HIS...BUT I SEE THERE IS NO FIGHT IN YOU.
I GRANT YOU SANCTUARY... AS A BOON TO YOUR COUSIN, MORDRED.

SIR PERCY WAS AGGRIEVED TO PLAY THE POLTROON... BUT AFTERWARDS, MERLIN LED HIM FURTIVELY TO HIS OWN SUBTERRANEAN LAIR...
AS A HARMLESS FOOL, YOU WILL LEARN MANY THINGS.
BUT, WHEN ARTHUR STANDS IN PERIL, YOU SHALL FIGHT FOR HIM IN THIS ARMORED GUISE.
YOU WILL BATTLE THE FOES OF THE REALM---AS THE BLACK KNIGHT!
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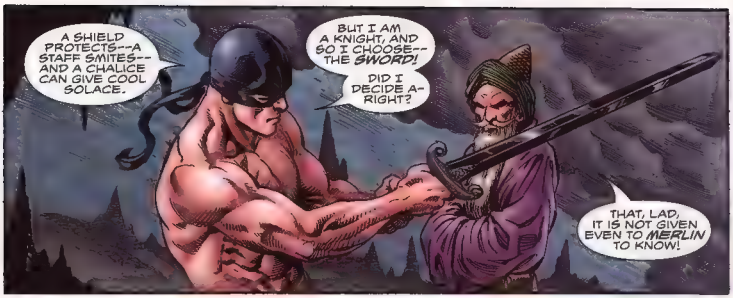
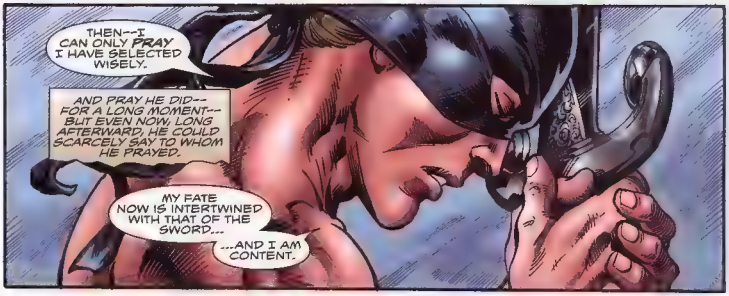
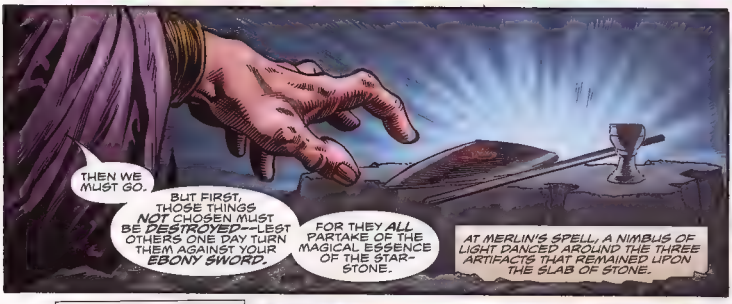
ONLY DAYS LATER, BRIGANDS SECRETLY IN MORDRED'S PAY AMBUSHED THE KING DURING A BOAR HUNT...
...AND THE BLACK KNIGHT JOINED THE MONARCH IN SLAYING THEM ALL!
FROM THIS DAY ON, YOU SHALL BE ALWAYS WELCOME AT CAMELOT, EVEN THOUGH YOU SAY YOU MAY NEVER REMOVE YOUR HELMET.
I DUB THEE TRUE, KNIGHT.
ARISE, SIR BLACK KNIGHT!
BUT, WHEN HE STOOD AGAIN IN MERLIN'S LAIR...
I DID NOT REVEAL ALL TRUTH TO YOU BEFORE, SIR PERCY.
THE CRYSTAL FORESEES DOOM FOR CAMELOT...NOR, SADLY, HAS IT EVER SHOWN ME FALSE.
YET, I DARE TO STAND ATHWART THE PATH OF DARK DESTINY--AND SAY UNTO IT, "NAY!"
WILL YOU DEFY THAT FOREDOOMED FUTURE WITH ME?
YOU KNOW I WILL, MAGE.
THEN FOLLOW...
...FOR YOU WILL HAVE NEED OF A BETTER BLADE!

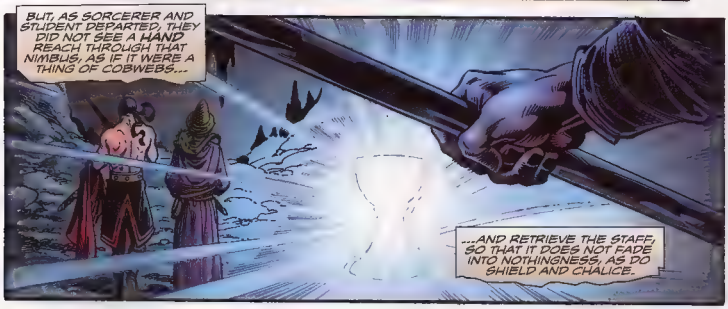
THE ANCIENT WIZARD LED HIM BENEATH EVEN HIS OWN UNDERGROUND LAIR...OR DID HE LEAD HIM INTO THE UNSUSPECTED DEPTHS OF HIS OWN SOUL?
BEHOLD, THE STARSTONE, WHICH I HAVE BORNE HERE.
IT GLOWS--- LIKE A THING ALIVE!
PERHAPS IT DOES LIVE, IN ITS WAY.
IS IT A TRICK OF THE LIGHT, MERELY--OR DOES THIS SUNKEN POOL RUN SCARLET?
IT HAS THE ASPECT OF BLOOD!
IT IS BLOOD, LAD.
THIS IS THE FABLED POOL OF BLOOD, WHICH CONTAINS THE LIFE'S BLOOD OF ALL WHO HAVE EVER LIVED AND DIED.*
IT FELL, YEARS AGO, FROM THE SECRET-SHROUDED HEAVENS...
AND IT RADIATES A MAGIC WHICH WILL GIVE INVINCIBILITY TO ANY WEAPON MADE FROM IT!
TONIGHT, WE MUST FORGE ARTIFACTS SUCH AS MORTAL HAND HAS NEVER HELD!
IT IS GUARDED BY ONE CALLED ORPHELUS---BUT I HAVE LURED HIM AWAY WITH A RUSE.
WE MUST ACT SWIFTLY, ERE HE RETURNS.
MERLIN HAD PREPARED FOR THIS HOUR--FOR ALREADY A FORGE WAS IN PLACE...
...AND AN ANVIL UPON WHICH SIR PERCY WAS ORDERED TO HAMMER AT GLEAMING SLIVERS CUT FROM THE STARSTONE.
SO THICK WAS THE ACRID SMOKE THAT HE COULD SCARCELY SEE THAT WHICH HE STRUCK...
* AS SEEN IN THE TOMB OF DRACULA #15.

AND WHEN THE YOUNG KNIGHT LOOKED OVER HIS SHOULDER...
...HE BEHELD THE MAGE CASTING A SPELL THAT MADE CRIMSON BLOOD RISE FROM THE POOL AS IF IN A FUNNEL.
AN INSTANT MORE, AND THAT RAGING RED ESSENCE CASCADED OVER THAT WHICH LAY BEFORE SIR PERCY...
MERLIN--WHAT--?
ONLY THIS SACRED BLOOD CAN COOL THE OBJECTS YOU HAVE FORGED.
LOOK NOW--AND LEARN!
THE BLOOD--ALREADY, IT HAS FLOWED ALL AWAY--
--LEAVING NOT SO MUCH AS A SCARLET STAIN BEHIND!
AND--IS THIS THE HANDIWORK ON WHICH I LABORED, IN A BLIND FEVER?
A SWORD--A SHIELD--A STAFF--A CHALICE--EACH BLACK AS THE NIGHT, AS IF IT DID ENGULF THE VERY LIGHT!
ONE OF THESE--BUT ONE ONLY--WILL SAVE CAMELOT--
--IF YOU CHOOSE THE RIGHT ONE.
CHOOSE!


A SHIELD PROTECTS--A STAFF SMITES--AND A CHALICE CAN GIVE COOL SOLACE.
BUT I AM A KNIGHT, AND SO I CHOOSE--THE SWORD!
DID I DECIDE A-RIGHT?
THAT, LAD, IT IS NOT GIVEN EVEN TO MERLIN TO KNOW!


THEN--I CAN ONLY PRAY I HAVE SELECTED WISELY.
AND PRAY HE DID--FOR A LONG MOMENT--BUT EVEN NOW, LONG AFTERWARD, HE COULD SCARCELY SAY TO WHOM HE PRAYED.
MY FATE NOW IS INTERTWINED WITH THAT OF THE SWORD...
...AND I AM CONTENT.


THEN WE MUST GO.
BUT FIRST, THOSE THINGS NOT CHOSEN MUST BE DESTROYED--LEST OTHERS ONE DAY TURN THEM AGAINST YOUR EBONY SWORD.
FOR THEY ALL PARTAKE OF THE MAGICAL ESSENCE OF THE STAR-STONE.
AT MERLIN'S SPELL, A NIMBUS OF LIGHT DANCED AROUND THE THREE ARTIFACTS THAT REMAINED UPON THE SLAB OF STONE.


BUT, AS SORCERER AND STUDENT DEPARTED, THEY DID NOT SEE A HAND REACH THROUGH THAT NIMBUS, AS IF IT WERE A THING OF COBWEBS...
...AND RETRIEVE THE STAFF, SO THAT IT DOES NOT FADE INTO NOTHINGNESS, AS DO SHIELD AND CHALICE.

FOR MONTHS TO COME, WITH EBONY SWORD IN HAND, THE BLACK KNIGHT DID PROTECT ARTHUR PENDRAGON...
...FROM MURDEROUS PLOTS HATCHED BY MORDRED, WHOSE VILE HAND IN THEM WAS NEVER DETECTED BY A TOO-TRUSTING KING...
...FROM WILD BEASTS, FROTHED TO MADNESS THAT THEY MIGHT SERVE AS AGENT OF A MONARCH'S DEATH...
...FROM BARBARIC NORTHMEN WHO RAIDED BRITAIN'S SHORES AND WOULD HAVE SLAIN ANY SOLDIER--OR SOVEREIGN--WHO STOOD AGAINST THEM.

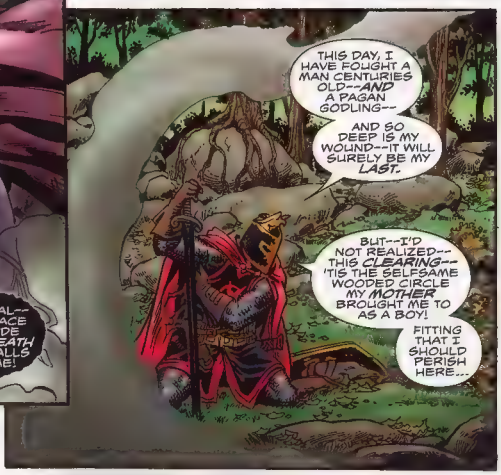
AND THEN, AS THE LATE-SUMMER DAYS GREW SHORT, HE FOUGHT A FOE WHO WAS LIKE NO OTHER:
FOOL! DO YOU THINK TO PREVAIL AGAINST TYRANNUS--- WHO EMBODIES THE MIGHT OF ANCIENT ROME---?
---AND WHO SERVES THE DEATH-GOD WHOM THE GREEKS CALLED HADES---WE ROMANS, PLUTO?
SINCE YOU STROVE TO USURP ARTHUR'S THRONE IN YOUR EVIL LORD'S NAME...
...I SHALL SEND YOU TO JOIN HIM IN HIS DARK DOMAIN!
THERE IS NO NEED, MORTAL...
---FOR HADES IS HERE!
FIGHT ON, TYRANNUS!
I--I AM NO MATCH FOR MERLIN'S AVATAR!
I'LL SEEK AN EASIER KINGDOM TO CONQUER.
THEN FLEE--- FOR EVEN AN IMMORTAL CAN BE A COWARD FOREVER!
LET A DEITY SMITE THIS REALM'S DEFENDER--AND RESTORE THE RULE OF THE OLD GODS TO THIS LAND!
NEVER--- BE YOU GOD IN TRUTH, OR DEMON IN DISGUISE!

ONCE, I DID SEIZE THE MAIDEN PERSEPHONE, DAUGHTER OF DEMETER--SHE WHO IS CALLED ALSO GAEA.
THUS, 'TIS ONLY FITTING I DEFEAT ONE WHO DEFENDS THE DESTINY OF EARTH ITSELF!

AARGH!
HAH! I STAND TRIUMPHANT OVER HUMANITY'S CHAMPION!

TRIUMPHANT--
ARROGANT--
--AND CARELESS!
AAyyyyy!

I--MUST HIE ME BACK TO MY NETHER REALM--TO NURSE MY WOUNDS!
BUT YOU, MORTAL--HAVE NO PLACE YOU CAN HIDE FROM THE DEATH THAT NOW CALLS YOUR NAME!


THIS DAY, I HAVE FOUGHT A MAN CENTURIES OLD--AND A PAGAN GODLING--
AND SO DEEP IS MY WOUND--IT WILL SURELY BE MY LAST.
BUT--I'D NOT REALIZED--THIS CLEARING--'TIS THE SELFSAME WOODED CIRCLE MY MOTHER BROUGHT ME TO AS A BOY!
FITTING THAT I SHOULD PERISH HERE...

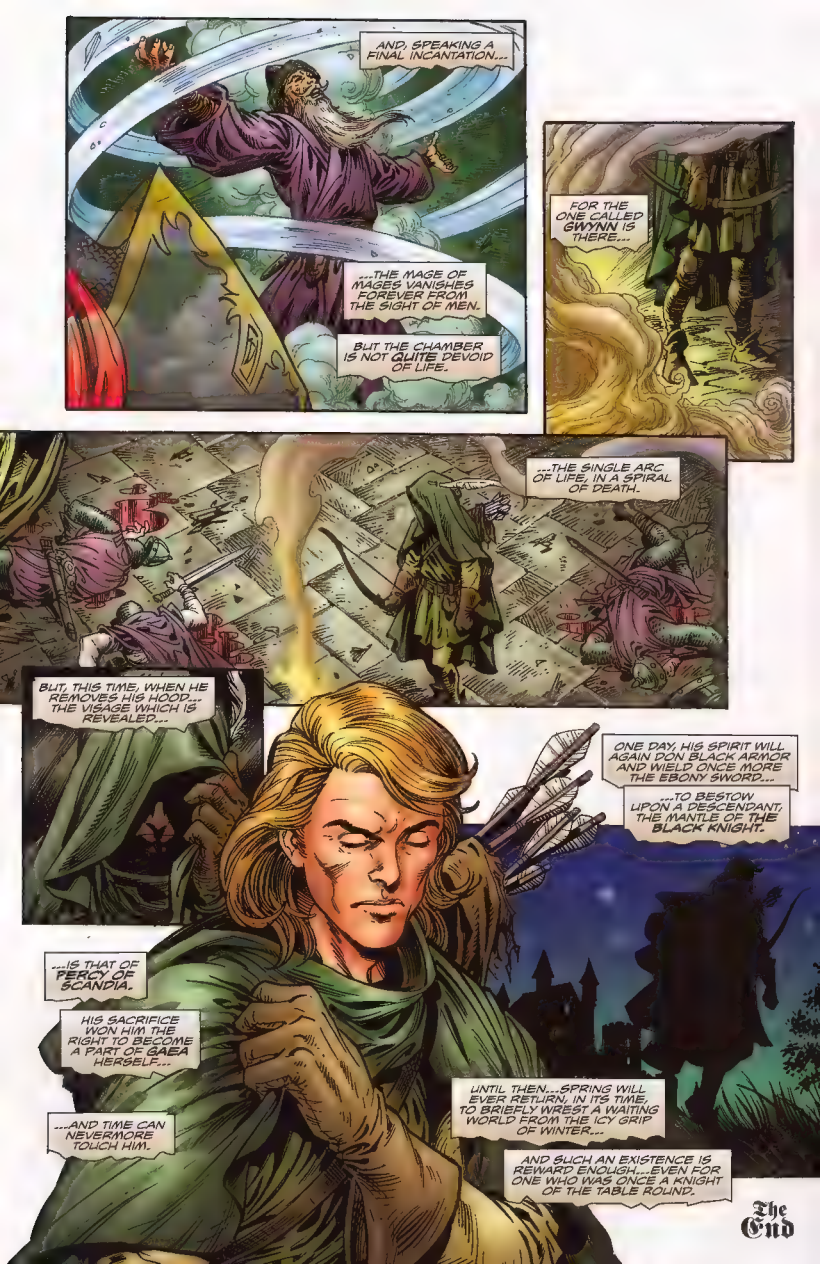
...OR NOT, AS IT PLEASE ME!
A KNIGHT--ALL CLAD IN GREEN?!
WHO'S THIS I SEE--THROUGH DIMMING EYES?
DO YOU NOT RECOGNIZE ME, SIR PERCY?
YOU KNOW... MY TRUE NAME...?
I KNOW...
...MANY THINGS.
GWYNN!
THE HUNTER SPIRIT--WHO TOLD ME I WAS THE HAND OF FATE...!
IN THIS WORLD, EVERY THING IS BALANCED BY SOMETHING ELSE...
...WHICH MAY SEEM ITS OPPOSITE; BUT IN TRUTH MERELY COMPLETES THE OTHER.
THUS HADES AND MERLIN ON ONE PLANE...OR YOU AND TYRANNUS UPON THIS ONE.
ALL THINGS HAVE A TIME... BUT WHEN THAT TIME IS PAST, THEY MUST GIVE WAY TO THE NEW.
HADES WOULD NOT--SO YOU HAD TO FORCE HIS DEPARTURE FROM THIS SPHERE.
AYE; I--WON MY BATTLE AGAINST THE PAGAN GOD!
BUT WILL YOU BE READY TO QUIT THIS WORLD--WHEN IT IS YOUR TIME TO YIELD TO THE NEW?
WHILE THERE IS...BREATH IN MY BODY...I WILL DO BATTLE...TO PROTECT CAMELOT.
YOU ARE UNBOWED--EVEN AS A RIVER OF BLOOD FLOWS FROM YOUR GOD-GIVEN WOUND.
I AM SORELY TEMPTED TO LET YOU DIE...

PERCY TENSED--EXPECTING TO BE HURLED DOWN INTO THE DEEP WELL OF DEATH...
BUT, INSTEAD...
I SAID ONCE THAT YOU WERE THE HAND OF FATE.
BUT YOU MUST LIVE--TILL YOU FIND YOUR OWN FATE--AND THE WORLD'S.
I FEEL SUDDENLY RESTORED--AS IF HADES' AXE HAD NEVER STRUCK!
YOU ARE HEALED--BECAUSE YOU'VE STILL A PART TO PLAY--
--IF ONLY YOU WILL!
THEN, AND ONLY THEN, SHALL YOU PASS INTO THE NIGHT WHICH SEES NO DAWN.
ALL THIS--FROM DRUID NIGHT TO THE BOON OF GWYNN--SIR PERCY HAS SEEN IN AN INSTANT--
--AS HE SLAYS THE LAST OF MORDRED'S ARMORED MINIONS, IN CASTLE SCANDIA--
--YET KNOWS HIS VICTORY WILL NOT BRING NEW LIFE TO ARTHUR PENDRAGON!

HIS HELMET MASKS HIS STREAMING TEARS...AS HE STRIDES AMONG THE DEAD.
SURELY, THAT COWARD MORDRED IS FLED...
...AND I MUST SEEK HIM OUT...
...ONCE I HAVE RECAPTURED MY BREATH.
BUT PERCY'S COUSIN--HE WHO HAS SCHEMED ARTHUR'S DOWNFALL FOR SO LONG--HAS NOT FLED.
RATHER, HE WAITS IN HIDING, WITH DAGGER IN HAND...
A DAGGER FORGED FROM AN EBONY STAFF...
...AFTER HIS WITCH-WIFE'S MAGIC ENABLED HIM TO RETRIEVE IT FROM MERLIN'S NIMBUS OF LIGHT.
AND, WATCHING FROM AFAR OFF...
PERCY KNOWS MORDRED LURKS BEHIND HIM!
HE PRESENTS HIS BACK--AND MEANS TO TURN AND SLAY THE ASSASSIN WHEN HIS MURDEROUS HAND IS RAISED!
A MOMENT--AND SORCEROUS SMOKE SWIRLS AROUND THE BLACK KNIGHT LIKE A BARBED LASH ALL MADE OF MIST.
HE SENSES IT IS MERLIN'S DOING... AS, IN A FROZEN MOMENT, HE BEHOLDS A VISION...
A VISION OF TWO QUITE DIFFERENT FUTURES FOR THE WORLD OF MEN!

IN ONE, HIS DESCENDANT--DANE WHITMAN--CARRIES ON THE VALIANT FIGHT AS THAT ERA'S BLACK KNIGHT.
IT IS A WORLD STILL FRAUGHT WITH EVIL, BUT THERE IS GOOD, TOO--AND OFTEN THAT GOOD TRIUMPHS.
A WORLD THAT REACHES TO THE STARS, IN WAYS SIR PERCY COULD NEVER FATHOM.
THE OTHER IMAGE IS OF A WORLD FROZEN FOREVER IN THE MODE OF THE AGE OF CAMELOT.
THERE, A VILE BLACK KNIGHT--NATHAN GARRETT--IS CHIEF ENFORCER FOR DEGENERATE DESCENDANTS OF THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE.
THIS IS A WORLD RULED BY FORCE AND TERROR--BY THE SPIRITS OF HIS ANCESTOR MORDRED AND THE CRUEL MORGAN LE FEY--
--WHERE THE BLACK KNIGHT'S NAME IS CURSED BY A POPULACE GROUND UNDER HIS BOOTED HEEL.
AND PERCY KNOWS, IN THAT INSTANT, THAT, IF HE TURNS AND THRUSTS HIS EBONY BLADE INTO MORDRED'S HEART--
--THE WORLD WILL REMAIN A PLACE WHERE EVIL HOLDS SWAY--AND HE HIMSELF WILL HAVE MADE IT SO--
--BY STRIVING TO PRESERVE CAMELOT--EVEN BLESSED CAMELOT--BEYOND ITS APPOINTED TIME!
AND SO, WHEN THE SHADOW OF DEATH'S DAGGER FALLS ACROSS HIS BACK, HE DOES NOT TURN...

ARRRR!
...AND MORDRED STRIKES HOME!
YOU COME TOO LATE, MERLIN!
HE FALLS, JUST AS ARTHUR HAS FALLEN--AS CAMELOT HAS FALLEN!
I WILL NOT ENLIGHTEN YOU, MORDRED.
IN THE HOUR SIR PERCY DIES, YOUR OWN DEATH IS ALSO VERY NEAR.
AT WHOSOEVER'S HAND IT COMES--YOU'LL NOT LIVE OUT THE NIGHT.
EVERY VOICE WITHIN ME CRIED OUT TO STEP IN AND SAVE YOU...
...BUT FATE HAD NEED TO PLAY ITSELF OUT...AND YOU WERE, AS PROPHESIED, THE HAND OF FATE.
THIS ERA WHICH YOU AND I HELPED BRING INTO EXISTENCE MUST FALL, ALAS.
CAMELOT AND THE AGE THAT SPAWNED IT MUST PASS AWAY...
...AND A NEW AGE BE BORN.
PERHAPS, GIVEN TIME, IT WILL PROVE ITSELF A BETTER ERA.
MERLIN...
HAVE I...FAILED...?
NAY. YOU PERISHED--SO THAT A WORLD MIGHT BE BORN.
BUT MERLIN IS SPEAKING TO HIMSELF NOW...
...FOR THE BLACK KNIGHT IS NO MORE.


AND, SPEAKING A FINAL INCANTATION...
...THE MAGE OF MAGES VANISHES FOREVER FROM THE SIGHT OF MEN.
BUT THE CHAMBER IS NOT QUITE DEVOID OF LIFE.
FOR THE ONE CALLED GWYNN IS THERE...
...THE SINGLE ARC OF LIFE, IN A SPIRAL OF DEATH.
BUT, THIS TIME, WHEN HE REMOVES HIS HOOD... THE VISAGE WHICH IS REVEALED...
...IS THAT OF PERCY OF SCANDIA.
HIS SACRIFICE WON HIM THE RIGHT TO BECOME A PART OF GAEA HERSELF...
...AND TIME CAN NEVERMORE TOUCH HIM.
ONE DAY, HIS SPIRIT WILL AGAIN DON BLACK ARMOR AND WIELD ONCE MORE THE EBONY SWORD...
...TO BESTOW UPON A DESCENDANT, THE MANTLE OF THE BLACK KNIGHT.
UNTIL THEN...SPRING WILL EVER RETURN, IN ITS TIME, TO BRIEFLY WREST A WAITING WORLD FROM THE ICY GRIP OF WINTER...
AND SUCH AN EXISTENCE IS REWARD ENOUGH...EVEN FOR ONE WHO WAS ONCE A KNIGHT OF THE TABLE ROUND.
The End

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AVALON, THE PRESENT
HOW FARES MY "CHECKERED CHAMPION," SIR IAN MCNEE?
I'M GETTING WARMER, MORGAN. I CAN FEEL IT. WHY NOT HEAR WHAT I HAVE TO SAY?
VERY WELL! OUT WITH IT, THEN. THEN I CAN FEED YOU TO MY CROWS!
YOUR MAJESTY, I NEED YOUR HELP TO FIND A POWERFUL MAGIC ITEM. A CORNERSTONE OF CREATION CALLED THE EBON ROSE.
A ROSE? ARE YOU A HERO OR A GARDENER? LET'S FIND OUT!
Once upon a time...Morgan le Fay was a beloved priestess of the Mother Earth. She helped bring bountiful harvests to her followers and healed them when they were ill. But this story does not have a "happily ever after." Something or someone changed her and now she is only interested in destruction and pain...
RITUAL OF THE SPHINX - PART 1
"LE FAY"
STORY - DAVID SEXTON
ART - ERIC NGUYEN
LETTERING - BLAMBOT'S NATE PICKOS
ASSISTANT EDITOR - NATHAN COSBY
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EDITOR IN CHIEF - JOE QUESADA
PUBLISHER - DAN BUCKLEY

I ASK FOR THE CLAW AND THE BANE OF DAMBALLAH, THE SERAPHIM'S SHIELD...
I ASK FOR THE CLAW AND THE BANE OF DAMBALLAH, THE SERAPHIM'S SHIELD...
...AND THE FIST OF FARALLAH!
...AND THE FIST OF FARALLAH!
I ASK FOR THE CLAW AND THE BANE OF DAMBALLAH, THE SERAPHIM'S SHIELD
AND THE FIST OF FARALLAH!
...She has become as dangerous as she is beautiful. And that is saying something.
I must find a way to reach her though. She is the only being who can lead me to the second item I need to fulfill my quest. I now have the Sword of Bone. Morgan can show me the Ebon Rose.
If I can't bring together the four items and restore the Magician's soul, then Oshtur told me the essence of Magic itself is at risk! Morgan may be filled with bitterness and apathy towards the world, but she loves magic. I'm certain of that. She *is* magic.
I will find a way to make her listen to me. If she will just listen, then there's a chance.

Mistress, Tsk. Tsk. You're not even trying. Enchanted trees?
What next? An assault with flying monkeys?
PERHAPS I'LL HURL AN ENCHANTED LOOM AT HIM.
You wouldn't dare!
LITTLE KNOTTED THING, YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I WOULD DARE.

"I ONCE BURNED A THOUSAND ACRES OF FOREST TO PRESERVE A GROVE OF SACRED TREES.
"ONCE UPON A SAMHAIN, MY MENTOR, MY LOVER, MERLIN, THOUGHT I WOULD NOT DARE KEEP HIM FROM ENTERING AVALON'S OAKEN ALTAR.
"FOR MANY SEASONS, WE BOTH FELT THE SPIRIT PATTERNS REWEAVING. FAITH IN THE MOTHER GODDESS UNRAVELED AS THE CULTS OF THE SKY FATHER AND THE RESURRECTED SUN GREW STRONGER.
"I FOUGHT THE CHANGE. MERLIN LAUGHED AT ME, 'AND WILL YOU STOP THE MOON FROM RISING, MY LADY LE FAY?' HE STILL SANG HYMNS TO GAEA, BUT HIS SONG WAS EMPTY. HE HAD ALREADY SWORN NEW OATHS TO NEW GODS.
"MERLIN EVEN IGNORED GAEA'S GIFTS OF PRECIOUS ORES AND POURED HIS STRONGEST MAGICS INTO SOME ALIEN DEBRIS HE CALLED THE STAR STONE. HE WAS FORGING EBON ARTIFACTS TO PROTECT HIS PRECIOUS CAMELOT. I GREW TO HATE HIS CAMELOT, AS I GREW TO HATE HIM.
'MY LADY LE FAY,' HE CALLED ME. 'MY LADY LE FAY, YOU CANNOT STOP ME FROM ENTERING THIS GROVE.' BUT HE WAS WRONG.
"I DRAGGED BURNING ROCK FROM BELOW THE EARTH TO SHOVE DOWN HIS SMUG THROAT. AND MY LOVE, HE TORE SHOOTING STARS FROM THE EDGES OF THE SKY AND HURLED THEM DOWN AT ME.
"I CAN ONLY REMEMBER HATING HIM, BUT I MUST HAVE LOVED HIM ONCE. HATRED THAT ENDURES FOR EONS MUST HAVE STARTED OUT AS LOVE.
"OUR MAGICAL ARMAGEDDON LASTED FOR SIX DAYS. AND BY THE SIXTH DAY, THERE WAS NO GROVE LEFT FOR HIM TO ENTER."

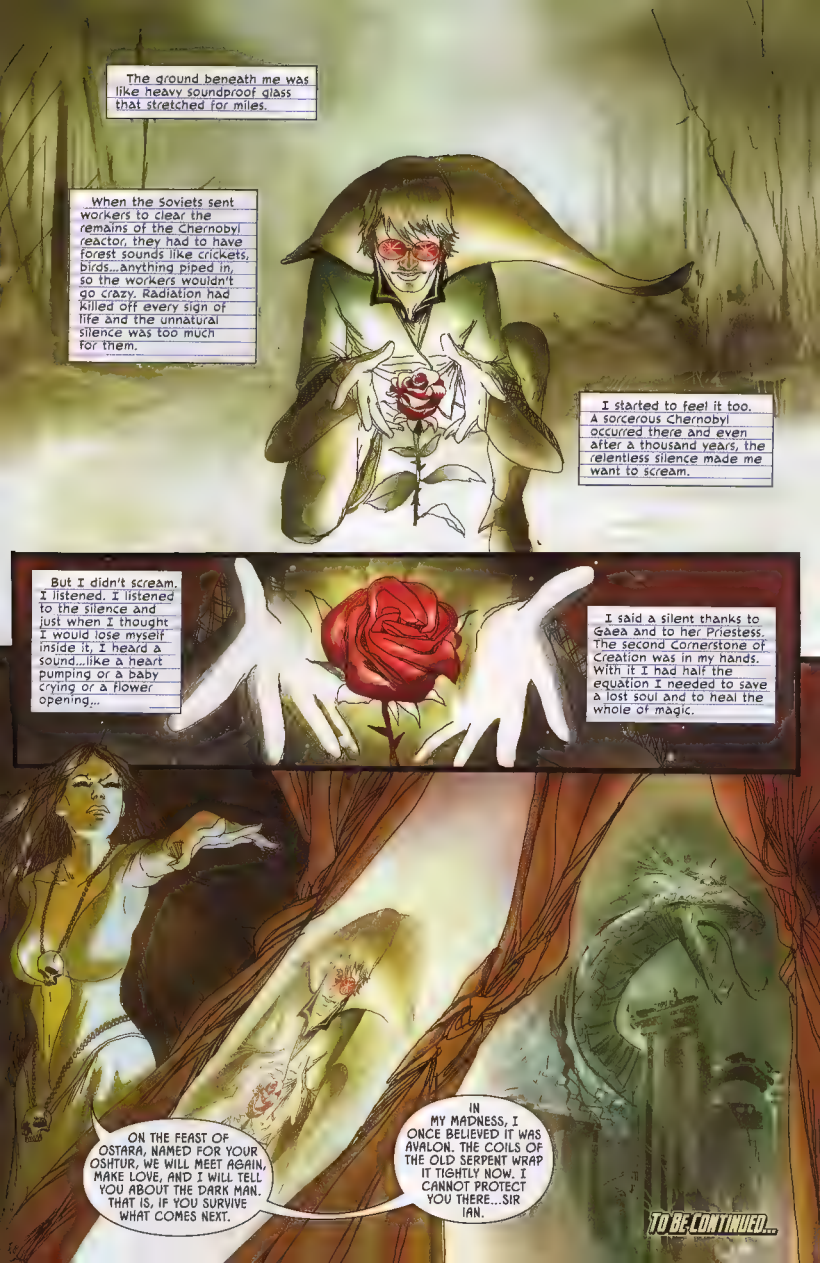
FIRES FROM THE HEAVENS, FIRES FROM THE EARTH... THE FOREST DID NOT SEEM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE.
MORGAN?
HELLO...
SIMON SAID, "NO," BUT RANDY AND PAULA SAID, "YOU'RE GOING TO HOLLYWOOD!"
WAS IT JUST MOMENTS AGO THAT I THOUGHT YOU WERE AMUSING?
VERY WELL. YOU MAY ENTER OUR CHAMBER.

GREAT QUEEN, I AM IN NEED OF AID THAT ONLY YOU CAN PROVIDE. AID A HUMBLE JUGGLER IN HIS QUEST?
LET ME LOOK INTO YOUR EYES...
PLEASE...YOUR HIGHNESS!
YOU TREAT ME AS A QUEEN INSTEAD OF AS A CRIMINAL. IS THIS YOUR HONEST SELF OR ARE YOU USING A TACTIC? DO YOU EVEN KNOW?

WHAT HAVE WE DONE TO OUR EYES, SIR IAN? WOULD YOU GO *ODIN-ONE-EYE* ONE BETTER?
ARE THEY IN THE BOTTOM OF A WELL? IN THE MOUTH OF A FALCON?
I...I...
WHAT IF I TELL YOU THE ONLY WAY I AM WILLING TO REVEAL THE LOCATION OF THE EBON ROSE IS IF YOU LOOK ME IN THE EYES AND ASK ME.
COME NOW. THE ROSE WILL HAVE WITHERED AND DIED IF YOU DON'T MOVE ALONG.
LEAVE THEN. I HAVE SEEN ENOUGH DARKNESS THIS DAY. NO MORE.
MY DEEPEST GRATITUDE, MY LADY LE FAY...

WHAT WAS THAT? SAY... THAT... AGAIN!
Uh...WHAT EXACTLY...THE PART ABOUT RANDY AND PAULA?
SAY IT AGAIN OR I WILL RIP THE BREATH FROM YOUR LUNGS!
MY DEEPEST GRATITUDE, MY LADY LE FAY.
NOW BE SILENT!
TAPESTRY, UNTANGLE THIS ENCHANTMENT.
WHAT TWISTED THING IS THIS? SMELLS LIKE CURRY... AND...CURDS!

I USED A SPELL TO CLARIFY AND INTENSIFY VISHUDDHA, THE THROAT CHAKRA, AND THEN I...I WOVE A FAERY GLAMOUR THROUGH IT.
YOU WOULD USE A FAERY GLAMOUR AGAINST MORGAN LE FAY?
IT WAS WOVEN VERY TIGHTLY...I MEAN, I ALMOST PULLED IT OFF...
AND WHAT WAS IT EXACTLY YOU WERE HOPING TO "PULL OFF"?
THE GLAMOUR MADE MY VOICE SOUND, WELL...SOUND A LITTLE LIKE MERLIN'S.
MERLIN?
OF COURSE YOU HATE HIM, BUT, TO BE FRANK, YOU DON'T LIKE ANYBODY. AT LEAST YOU SEEM TO HAVE SOME RESPECT FOR MERLIN. I HOPED HIS VOICE WOULD HELP TO SWAY YOU.
SO MUCH IS AT STAKE.
TRULY, YOU DO REMIND ME OF MY MISCHIEVOUS MERLIN, AND YOUR TWISTED GLAMOUR IS NOT THE REASON.
GO THEN TO THE DARKENED HEART OF AVALON, TO THE LIFELESS ASHES THAT WERE ONCE THE OAKEN ALTAR. I GIVE YOU LEAVE TO VISIT MY SHAME. THAT IS WHERE YOU'LL FIND THE ROSE.


The ground beneath me was like heavy soundproof glass that stretched for miles.
When the Soviets sent workers to clear the remains of the Chernobyl reactor, they had to have forest sounds like crickets, birds...anything piped in, so the workers wouldn't go crazy. Radiation had killed off every sign of life and the unnatural silence was too much for them.
I started to feel it too. A sorcerous Chernobyl occurred there and even after a thousand years, the relentless silence made me want to scream.
But I didn't scream. I listened. I listened to the silence and just when I thought I would lose myself inside it, I heard a sound...like a heart pumping or a baby crying or a flower opening...
I said a silent thanks to Gaea and to her Priestess. The second Cornerstone of Creation was in my hands. With it I had half the equation I needed to save a lost soul and to heal the whole of magic.
ON THE FEAST OF OSHTARA, NAMED FOR YOUR OSHTUR, WE WILL MEET AGAIN, MAKE LOVE, AND I WILL TELL YOU ABOUT THE DARK MAN. THAT IS, IF YOU SURVIVE WHAT COMES NEXT.
IN MY MADNESS, I ONCE BELIEVED IT WAS AVALON. THE COILS OF THE OLD SERPENT WRAP IT TIGHTLY NOW. I CANNOT PROTECT YOU THERE...SIR IAN.
TO BE CONTINUED...

Mystic Arcana

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in the Marvel Universe...

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